

Joe Kimball, *MinnPost*

VP Joe Biden's going to hear about more than just Mark Dayton's bid for governor while he's in town today stumping for the DFL candidate - Congresswoman Betty McCollum and St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman want to bend his ear on an energy project they'd like to see funded with federal millions.

St. Paul officials see a perfect opportunity to expand their District Energy system - which already heats and cools 185 downtown buildings with water heated by wood waste and pumped through underground pipes.

They want to expand it along the Central Corridor light rail line that is being built to connect the two downtowns of St. Paul and Minneapolis. They figure they can bring efficient energy to 120,000 residents and businesses along the rail route, which runs along University Avenue for much of its length.

But they need to do this while the light rail line is being built, to do their work in conjunction with the rail construction. Otherwise the cost gets way more expensive.

The cost of building the District Energy expansion alongside the light rail project is estimated at \$34 million and they've already raised half, through foundations, state and local government and District Energy.

They need the rest from the federal government by late November. The Department of Energy apparently likes the idea but can't figure out how to fund it, according to a letter sent last week by McCollum to Biden.

The letter says:

Experts at the Department of Energy's Oak Ridge National Laboratory reviewed this project in July 2010 and found it to be: "a reasonable and credible technical proposal that is essentially 'shovel ready.'" In fact, numerous leaders within the DOE have been briefed on the Integrated Energy Corridor and each one expressed strong support - often excitement - for the project. However, they have indicated that the project does not fit into any of the existing "buckets" for funding at the Department of Energy.

So McCollum and Coleman are asking Biden to intercede, and quickly. Notes McCollum's letter:

This is a very innovative project and innovation often requires special attention and creative thinking. I am appealing to you to help to identify federal funding provided in the Recovery Act or elsewhere in the next six weeks."

McCollum's staff says other work is under way to get the funding for the project, called the Integrated Energy Corridor. On Monday, federal and local government officials met with energy representatives on the issue.

"Congresswoman McCollum has been behind this project from the start because it will result in clean energy jobs and renewable energy at stable prices. She is working to get the federal government on board by reaching out to administration officials, notably Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner, Assistant Secretary for Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy Cathy Zoi and Vice President Joe Biden," said Maria Reppas, McCollum's communications director.